

Continue + to + verb / + verb + ing and the slight but significant difference between their meanings

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When two grammatical forms are present in a language, we can assume that there is a difference in meaning, or else one form would fall out of usage. The difference may be only one of nuance, but may also indicate subtle intentions of the writer or speaker. Many English Grammar textbooks published in Japan (as well as many published in native English-speaking countries) argue that there is little or no difference between the use of *continue* followed by an infinitive versus *continue* followed by a gerund. Others note a slight but significant difference between the two forms. This paper will look at various examples from a variety of sources to demonstrate that there is indeed a clear difference in meaning when the verb *continue* is followed by an infinitive in contrast with a gerund.

Key words: *continue* to ~ (infinitive), *continue* ~ing (gerund), Bolinger principle

The most basic of introductory English grammar textbooks usually note how some English verbs can only be followed by infinitives ("I WANT to ski") and others only by gerunds ("I ENJOY skiing") and still others that can take both ("I LIKE to ski/skiing").

Those that can take both infinitives and gerunds seem to fall into two separate categories showing a significant difference between the two forms, the first with rather radically different meanings in the infinitive and gerund use, and the second showing relatively little distinction between the infinitive and gerund constructions. For the first group, those that show very different meanings between the two cases, the following serve as good examples:

I REMEMBERed to send the letter.

(the act of remembering occurred first)

I REMEMBERed sending the letter.

(the act of sending occurred first)

At first glance, other verbs (e.g., START, BEGIN, COMMENCE, and CONTINUE) show relatively little difference between the two forms, for example:

I CONTINUE to smoke.

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I CONTINUE smoking.

The verb CONTINUE in particular is especially troublesome and many English grammar textbooks used in Japan remark that little or no difference exists between the two forms. Yet the few following examples illustrate a small but significant difference in meaning between the use of the infinitive vs. the use of the gerund following CONTINUE.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983), discuss the Bolinger Principle and note how he distinguishes the verb plus infinitive use from that of the verb plus gerund, indicating that the infinitive expresses something hypothetical, future-looking, unfulfilled, whereas the gerund, in contrast, expresses something more real, vivid, and fulfilled (pp. 433–36). They use the following examples to illustrate their point:

Gerund

I remember locking the door.

(locking occurred before remembering)

Infinitive

I remembered to lock the door.

(remembering occurred before locking)

Also:

Infinitive

I like to camp in the mountains. (It's so peaceful there.)

(more remote, more objective)

Gerund

I like camping in the mountains. (It's so peaceful here.)

(more immediate, more vivid) (p. 436, emphasis ours)

The use of the infinitive construction indicates general patterns of behavior, but it does not indicate that the activity actually took place. It may support the idea of the activity having taken place, implicitly. Activity is more remote, objective, hypothetical, unfulfilled, and future oriented in nature. The use of the gerund on the other hand, indicates that the activity was launched, that it actually took place and is, therefore, more real, fulfilled, more immediate, vivid and perhaps, subjective. Therefore, context is very important for exact interpretation of the meaning of these examples, though they are often vague and open for interpretation (and misunderstanding). Also note, that the *to*+verb construction may indicate *in order to*, and that the gerund that follows may indeed be a participle form.

It may be appropriate to note other differences, specifically that of aspect (facet) which applies to the other verbs previously mentioned above (*start*, *commence*, *begin*). Aspect is usually used in reference to verb tense, and "indicates that the action of a verb is either completed or continuing." (Morenberg, 1997, p. 55). Commonly referred to as the Perfect and Progressive case or form, it is problematic in the CONTINUE example because of the meaning of the verb itself, that is, action preceding or going on.

Martin (1998) argues that the aspectual difference between the use of the Infinitive and the

Gerund reflects whether an "activity was or was not actually launched and in progress at some point. The infinitive does not indicate that the activity took place; the gerund indicates that it did, albeit embryonically in some cases." Context, however, is the final criterion as in the use of the infinitive-TO SMOKE, which implies that it is based on experience, whereas SMOKING is more probably an actual activity, or so some speakers may feel.

Native English speakers themselves may have difficulty articulating the difference in meanings indicated, but sense the differences between the two examples of continue (degrees of objectivity, proximity or formality), nonetheless. References in several authoritative grammar books (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Thomson & Martinet 1986), note that these verbs indicated to be "aspectual", and also note that perhaps the gerund is not actually a gerund but a participle in these particular cases. Is it possible that these verbs indicated are of a more auxiliary nature?

The following examples perhaps demonstrate the importance of linguistic context and co-text for understanding the meaning more clearly. (These examples are from Auberon Waugh's autobiography, *Will This Do?* 1995)

(1a) Bron *continues to run* a temperature of between 102–103 but they don't seem very perturbed about it. Today was the hottest thing I have ever known. (p. 108)

Several important things to note about example (1a): the relative clause in the first sentence is introduced with "but", and "they", referring to the doctors in this instance, are not concerned. The doctors are therefore confident that the current fever will change, and change for the better (the lack of concern regarding the high fever). Furthermore, the next sentence goes on to comment about the incredible heat, creating a larger context and situating the fever as a usual occurrence, and thus, easily changeable, and less than concrete.

Now note that if we change the construction to that of *continue + gerund*, a very different meaning emerges, such as:

(1b) Bron *continues running* a temperature of between 102–103 but they don't seem very perturbed about it. Today was the hottest thing I have ever known.

If the gerund was used as indicated, this would strike the reader as odd because of the use of "but" to introduce the relative clause as indicated above.

The next example shows the distinct differences in nuance in one paragraph:

(2a) ... I returned there for several visits a year throughout my childhood and (1) *continued visiting* it often until Uncle Auberon's death in 1974. As a result, and because it is such a large, grand and unusual place, it lived and (2) *continues to live* in my imagination, although long since sold. (p. 14)

One must first note the very clearly defined time period being referred to; that is, Auberon's childhood. In (2a–1), the use of the gerund implies that his wishes were indeed fulfilled within the

period of his childhood and continued to be fulfilled up until the passing away of his uncle. The use of the infinitive in the (2a-2) sentence indicates a certain changeable quality in the verb to live, implying that his imagination may not be a consistent state, and thus unreliable and changeable. Note too the use of imagination instead of memory, which by nature is more permanent and less transitory.

The Bolinger Principle may then be considered to apply in the usage of the verb *continue* + to + v / *continue* + v + ing. The fact that some informed native speakers of English may not recognize this with reference to *continue* although they would most certainly recognize the Bolinger Principle with respect to the usage of other verbs, serves to illustrate how interesting and varied the idiolect of speakers can be. The fact that the infinitive following other verbs, such as *try*, conveys a sense of unfulfilled action, by extension, it is compelling to conclude that the same would be true in the case of *continue*.

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